Contextual Basis for Connecting Philippians 3:18-19 with Philippians 1:15-17

The question of whether those described by Paul as "enemies of the cross of Christ" in Philippians 3:18-19 could include those who "preached Christ out of envy" in Philippians 1:15-17 is a fascinating exegetical question that has generated significant scholarly debate. While the **majority of interpreters distinguish between these two groups**, there is a compelling minority position—most notably articulated by David E. Fredrickson—that argues they are indeed **the same opponents** unified by the ancient concept of *envy* (φθόνος).[1]

The Conventional Scholarly Position: Distinct Groups

Most New Testament commentators treat the opponents in Philippians as representing **multiple, distinct groups**. Gordon Fee noted that "as many as 18 different suggestions have been made for the identity of the 'opponent' in Philippians." The conventional view sees at least three or four separate groups:[2] [3]

The preachers in **1:15-17** are typically understood as **Christians who proclaimed an orthodox gospel** but with impure motives—personal rivalry, selfish ambition, and jealousy toward Paul. Crucially, Paul does not condemn them for doctrinal error but rejoices that "Christ is proclaimed" (1:18), whether in pretense or truth. John Chrysostom's interpretation has been influential here: "They preached not heresy but the true faith, yet out of ill will, thinking to add affliction." This contrasts sharply with Paul's approach in Galatians, where he pronounces a curse on those who distort the gospel itself (Gal. 1:8).[4] [5] [6]

The "enemies of the cross" in **3:18-19**, by contrast, are described with language suggesting **moral libertinism**: "their god is their belly," "their glory is in their shame," and they "set their minds on earthly things." Many scholars identify these as antinomians or libertines—people whose lifestyle contradicts the self-denial inherent in the cross message. Others suggest they may be lapsed Christians who, as Jesus prophesied in the Olivet Discourse, fell away because they "loved this present world" (like Demas in 2 Tim. 4:10).[7] [8]

The "dogs" and "evil workers" in **3:2** are often identified as a third group—**Judaizers** focused on circumcision—distinct from both the envious preachers of chapter 1 and the libertines of 3:18-19.[9] [7]

The Argument for a Unified Opposition

David Fredrickson of Luther Seminary has articulated the most developed argument that the "enemies of the cross of Christ" in 3:18 are **the same people** who "proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry" in 1:15. His argument rests on the ancient understanding of envy and its associated vices:[1]

The conceptual thread of envy: Fredrickson argues that modern scholars miss an obvious unifying theme because we are unfamiliar with how the ancients understood *phthonos* (envy). In Greco-Roman thought, envy was closely connected with a cluster of vices: strife (ἔρις, 1:15), selfish ambition (ἐριθεία, 1:17, 2:3), deceptive speech (1:17-18, "pretense"), abusive speech (2:14-15, "muttering and arguing"), and ultimately **enmity**. As Fredrickson notes: "Envy, the ancients thought, only occurred between fellow workers, compatriots, friends, or professional associates"—precisely the kind of rivalry between preachers sharing the same ministry.[1]

"Enemies" born of envy: The ancient understanding was that envy inevitably produced enmity. Basil of Caesarea, standing in a tradition reaching back to Homer and Plato, stated that "envy is the most difficult form of enmity to manage." Thus the designation "enemies" (ἐχθρούς) in 3:18 naturally flows from the envy (φθόνος) introduced in 1:15. The envious preachers wanted Paul's fame but not the suffering that came with his apostolic ministry—they were "enemies of the cross" not because they denied Christ theologically, but because they despised the self-sacrifice the cross represents.[1]

Lexical parallels throughout the letter: Fredrickson traces envy's "vicious companions" through Philippians: strife (1:15), selfish ambition (1:17, 2:3, 2:21), deceptive speech/"pretense" (1:18), muttering and arguing (2:14), the imagery of "dogs" engaging in envious abusive speech (3:2), and finally the characterizations of 3:19—"whose god is their belly" (selfishness driven by fleshly impulse) and "whose glory is in their shame" (perverse boasting). These are not random insults but the **recognized attributes of envious people** in ancient moral discourse.[1]

The improbability of distinct groups: Fredrickson asks: "How could one set of missionaries be both preachers of the cross and its despisers?" His answer is that these missionaries preach the theological content about Christ but despise the **way of the cross**—the suffering, humility, and self-sacrifice that Paul embodies. They want the fame of gospel proclamation without the cost.[1]

Textual and Contextual Considerations

Several textual features lend plausibility to connecting these passages:

Paul's emotional response: In 3:18, Paul says he speaks "even with tears" about these enemies. This emotional intensity is harder to explain if he is referring to complete outsiders or pagans; it fits better if these are people Paul had worked with or knew personally as fellow preachers—people whose trajectory from rivalry to enmity grieved him.[7] [1]

The frequency of warning: Paul says he has told them "often" about these enemies (3:18), suggesting an ongoing concern throughout his relationship with the Philippians, not a new or separate threat introduced only in chapter 3.

The letter's rhetorical unity: Rather than viewing Philippians as a composite of letter fragments (a partition theory that some scholars have proposed to explain the different opponents), rhetorical analysis increasingly supports reading the letter as a unified composition with consistent themes of humility versus selfish ambition, suffering versus earthly-mindedness, and the way of the cross versus its rejection.[10]

The competition among "workers": Paul emphasizes labor (ἔργον) throughout the letter—from his own work (1:5) to the "bad workers" (κακοὺς ἐργάτας) of 3:2. This fits the ancient pattern where envy arose specifically among practitioners of the same craft, as Hesiod observed: "potter is angry with potter, and craftsman with craftsman."[1]

Points of Difficulty

The identification is not without problems:

Different characterizations: The preachers in 1:15-17 are explicitly said to proclaim Christ, and Paul rejoices in this. The enemies in 3:18-19 are characterized primarily by their **conduct** ("walk"), not their preaching. If they are the same group, one must explain why Paul would rejoice in chapter 1 but weep in chapter 3.[7]

The phrase "enemies of the cross": This language suggests opposition to the cross's meaning or implications. While Fredrickson argues this refers to rejecting the cross's call to suffering and self-sacrifice (not doctrinal denial), others argue the phrase more naturally describes those who oppose the cross theologically or who reject its sufficiency.[11] [7]

The "dogs" distinction: Most interpreters separate the "dogs" of 3:2 (Judaizers concerned with circumcision) from the "enemies" of 3:18-19. If the opponents in 3:18-19 are the same as those in 1:15-17, and if the "dogs" are yet another group, the letter still contains multiple sets of opponents.[2] [7]

Scholarly Consensus and Minority Positions

The **majority position** holds that Philippians addresses **multiple groups**: rival Christian preachers with correct doctrine but wrong motives (1:15-17), Judaizers emphasizing circumcision (3:2), and libertines or apostates whose lifestyle makes them enemies of the cross (3:18-19). Peter O'Brien's commentary catalogues views of the 3:18 opponents including "moral libertinists, behavioural materialists, orthodox Jews, lapsed or apostate Christians—because of persecution, Jewish Christians for whom the cross had little significance, Judaizers, and so on."[12] [2] [7]

However, Fredrickson acknowledges that "it is a very unpopular view among Pauline scholars to think that the Christian missionaries of 1:15 who preach and proclaim Christ are the same as the enemies of the cross of Christ of 3:18." Yet he argues this unpopularity stems from our unfamiliarity with ancient envy discourse rather than from strong textual evidence against the connection.[1]

Assessment

There **is** a contextual basis for inferring that the "enemies of the cross" in 3:18-19 could include those who preached from envy in 1:15-17. The argument rests on:

- The ancient understanding of envy as inherently producing enmity
- The cluster of envy-related vices traced throughout Philippians
- The fact that both groups are characterized by selfish ambition and opposition to Paul
- The plausibility that preachers of correct doctrine could nonetheless be "enemies of the cross" by rejecting its implications for humble, self-sacrificing ministry

This interpretation requires understanding "enemies of the cross" as referring primarily to **lifestyle and attitude** rather than theological denial—a reading supported by the behavioral descriptors in 3:19 ("their god is their belly," etc.). The connection works if one sees Paul tracing a trajectory: what begins as envious rivalry in chapter 1 culminates in full-blown enmity to the way of the cross by chapter 3.

Whether one accepts this minority view depends largely on whether one reads Philippians through the lens of ancient envy discourse and whether one prioritizes the letter's thematic unity or its apparent description of distinct groups. The textual evidence permits both readings, though the conventional multi-opponent view remains dominant in scholarship.

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